

# Debating Guidelines

Debating is about developing your communication skills. It is about assembling and organising effective arguments, persuading and entertaining an audience, and using your voice and gestures to convince an adjudicator that your arguments outweigh your oppositions. Debating is **not** about personal abuse, irrational attacks or purely emotional appeals.

## The Definition

- Clarifies the topic. The definition should take the topic as a whole, defining individual words only if they have a key role. Out of the definition should come a clear understanding of the issues that will be fought over in the debate. It forms the basis of the team's argument.
- Define words or phrases by their common usage. Dictionaries may be useful for finding a common meaning or a pithy explanation of a word, but they are not an absolute authority. If a dictionary is necessary the Concise Oxford is often recommended, but squabbles over whose dictionary has the higher status have no place in good debating.

A definition must be reasonable:

- It must be debatable (i.e. have two sides to it).
- It must not be a bizarre distortion of the moot. (This is not to say that an affirmative may not choose an unusual interpretation of the moot, but they must be prepared to justify it).

If the definition does not conform to either of these two requirements, the negative has the right to challenge it. Be very careful about challenging the definition-only do so if you are absolutely certain that the affirmative's definition is unfair. It is better to be brave and dump your prepared case in favour of tackling the affirmative on their own terms than to issue an unjustified definitional challenge. By the same token, affirmative teams should try to ensure that their definition is fair.

The negative team **must** accept or reject the definition. If a negative team accepts the definition, they only need to say so-it is not necessary to restate it. If they challenge it, their justification for doing so must be clearly stated, and an alternative put forward. If the definition is accepted that definition must stand. The negative must adjust their case to that definition, and the adjudicator's views on its reasonableness become irrelevant.

## Argument

**Argument is not assertion**

Argument is the process of explaining why a point of view should be accepted. It concerns the logic and the evidence supporting a particular conclusion.

Use evidence (i.e. examples, facts, statistics, quotations of expert/public opinion etc.) to back up each point you make in your argument. Show how each piece of evidence is relevant and how it

advances your argument. Make a point, give the reason for that point, and supply evidence to back it up.

## **What adjudicators look for in a good argument:**

- Relevance
- Organisation
- Consistency and internal logic-i.e. don't contradict yourself or your team mates
- Clarity (remember, debating is about persuading your audience and adjudicator that you're right-so make sure they can understand what you're saying!)
- Effective use of evidence

## **Rebuttal**

Rebuttal is vital. An argument, however weak, stands until it is rebutted, and may still stand if it is badly rebutted. Adjudicators cannot regard an argument as knocked down until the opposition has rebutted it effectively. If a team makes an error in fact or logic, the adjudicator cannot penalise them unless the other team points out the error, or if the error is so blatant a reasonable member of the audience would discredit the argument.

As with argument, assertion does not equal rebuttal. Just as teams must show how and why their own arguments are valid, so they must show how and why the opposition's arguments are invalid.

- An argument may be wrong in fact or logic-if so, say how and why
- An argument may contradict their team line, or something else a speaker on that team has said
- An argument may be true but irrelevant-watch out for red herrings.

## **Organisation of rebuttal**

It is not necessary to rebut every single point and fact raised by the opposition. Single out their main arguments and attack those first. Savage their team case and show how it falls down-and show why yours is better! You should rebut by both destroying the opposition's arguments and by establishing a case that directly opposes theirs.

## **Requirements of the Speakers**

The six speakers each have different roles to play and adjudicators should take account of how well a speaker fulfils his/her obligations.

Teamwork is very important. It can be seen in the development and support of the team line by all speakers in a team, and in a team case that does not contain contradictions or redundancies.

**The first speakers establish the fundamentals of their team's cases.**

## **First Affirmative**

- Defines the topic, presents the basic team line and team split. She or he should set out the basis of the team's case, and should ensure that no important points of definition are left out. He or she may spend some time on the definition and on establishing the team case and showing how it is going to develop. But it is important to leave time to present some substantive arguments.

## **First Negative**

- Accepts or rejects the definition. (See definition section above).
- Outlines her/his team line and team split,
- Rebutts 1st affirmative, delivers a part of the negative's substantive case.

As a negative it is important to both attack the opposition's argument and put forward an alternative.

After the first speakers have spoken the direction of each case should be apparent.

**Second speakers - deal with the bulk of the substantive argument.**

## **Second Affirmative**

- Some rebuttal of the 1st negative's major arguments.
- Shore up and develop own team's case, and be prepared to defend the definition if necessary. If it is attacked, it is vital for the second affirmative to win back the initiative. However most of the 2nd affirmative's time should be spent dealing with new material and the bulk of the affirmative's case,

## **Second Negative**

- Some rebuttal of the first two affirmative speakers.
- Develops substantive negative line.
- Depending on the circumstances, a second negative speaker should adjust the amount of time spent on each of the above according to which seems more important.

Most of the teams' substantive argument should have emerged by the time the second speakers have spoken.

## **Third speakers**

The role of the third speakers is simply this: **Attack!** Most of a third speaker's time must be spent rebutting the preceding speakers. Generally at least three quarters of a third speech should be rebuttal.

The third speakers must also introduce an additional aspect of the team case and show development of the team line. However, they should not introduce major new arguments.

## Summaries

A summary is a review of both your own and the opposition's case. It represents a chance for the teams to show their arguments in the best light and to summarise the flaws in the opposition's case. The aim is to emphasise the major points made by your own team and to show how these contributed to a logical progression of argument in support of your team line. At the same time the flaws in the opposition's argument must be outlined. This can be done case by case, or by taking a more global approach to the arguments. Both are effective if well done, so find the summary style that suits you best.

New material should not be introduced, except in direct rebuttal. The arguments used in the summaries must remain within the parameters established during the debate.